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Dirty Collar Crime in Naples

Written by Vincenzo Ruggiero

It is true that “green criminology” should be grounded in the principles of environmental justice and help with the production of relevant legislative tools for the defence of the earth. However, there are conducts which violate even the limited and inconsistent existing norms. A variety of such conducts can be detected in the “rubbish crisis” experienced in Naples two years ago.

In Naples, local administrators have failed, or more likely avoided, to find a solution to rubbish disposal due to the presence within its territory of a myriad of groups with a vested interest in this specific industry. The fear of losing political support has led the local authorities to contract the business of garbage management to a large number of small companies, despite the dysfunctional effects that such unregulated segmentation had visibly caused. Some would attribute this distribution of “favours,” to the peculiar Neapolitan way of practising the principles of democracy; in reality, Vilfredo Pareto (Italian economist and sociologist of the 19th Century) sees it as a fundamental feature of democracy itself. In the “cynical” analysis of Pareto, the essence of democracies is the patron-client relationship, a relationship based on the most part upon economic interests. In his view, in order to maintain their stability, democratic systems have to aggregate the various centres of patronage and the various clienteles in such a way that they are all satisfied.

This Paretian arrangement, however, proved to be politically effective but economically disastrous for Naples, to such an extent that an “Extraordinary Commissioner for Rubbish” was appointed by the central government in 1994. The small companies, in other words, proved themselves to be competent in ensuring consensus and votes, but inept in delivering the services entrusted to them. The newly appointed Commissioner, however, lacking the awareness of the local political alchemy, found no cooperation in the region of Campania and its capital Naples. A new Commissioner was therefore appointed; he planned an ambitious large-scale integrated cycle which included differentiated garbage collection, its dumping in controlled sites, its transformation into compressed materials termed “ecoballs,” and the conversion of the latter into combustible oil.

This, finally, was to be sent to incinerators and turned into electric energy. Only in 1998 did this plan go out to tender and the winner, a corporation offering surprisingly low costs, took on the commitment to manage the whole cycle and to build the necessary facilities. The corporation showed its negotiating power by obtaining the permission to build disposal sites wherever they chose, as a reward for charging such a low price for its services. The place chosen was Acerra, namely an area where a new paediatric hospital was due to be built. While the inhabitants of Acerra started to riot, it became apparent that, even when completed, the prospective disposal sites would only be sufficient to process fifteen per cent of the garbage produced in the region.

The company limited its job to the destruction of the rubbish as this was brought by the lorries, compressing hundreds of thousands of “ecoballs,” and burying them in some existing regional sites, or sending them abroad. According to the agreement between the Regional authority and the company, while the whole cycle and plant were being completed, some sub-contractors would have been chosen for the disposal of the rubbish. This “interim” solution, in fact, lasted from 2000 to 2007, when it became clear that the old system based on numerous sub-contracts granted to small companies had never been abandoned. In fact, the aforementioned Paretian distribution of favours

intensified, causing frenetic estate activity in the area, with land being sold at three-four times its market value. New small entrepreneurs entered the scene, buying land from private owners and,

pending improbable authorisation, turning it into disposal sites. The new set of adventurous entrepreneurs expanded the already large area of illegal waste disposal, stepping up the provision of illicit dumping services to industrialists from the North of Italy. In the previous years organised crime based in the Campania region (the camorra) had often offered waste-disposal services to firms operating in the North, including those producing poisons such as dioxane. Under the new circumstances, firms set up by organised criminal groups proliferated, including improvised lorry owners limiting their role to the transportation of garbage.

The complicity of local politicians was detectable in the hasty, routine authorisations given to such improvised entrepreneurs, some of which used cover names of family members or associates without a criminal record. The small camorra entrepreneurs realised that one kilo of rubbish was worth more than one kilo of tomatoes, thus turning as much land as they could into illicit dumping sites. Sites that had been previously shut down by the authorities due to their dangerousness for public health were also utilised. After an emergency situation that had been lasting for fourteen years, and with a waste of money worth about eight billion euros, the situation culminated in what was called the 2007-2008 waste crisis, when sixty tons of rubbish were scattered on the streets of the Naples province. In the city of Naples alone, there were five thousands kilos of trash lying on the street. Some aspects of the case just described are far from unique. Research conducted in previous years has shown that processing industrial waste without a licence and sidestepping environmental regulations “is cheaper and faster.” Recent cases which had occurred in Germany show that, even in countries where the legislation is progressive and clear, illegal disposal of waste is still widespread. Such cases emerged when a mismatch was noted between the quantity of waste expected and the amounts actually received by the incinerators operating in the eastern regions of the country. The missing portion of waste was found to have been dumped in illegal disposal sites. Cases such as these, occurring in the highly ecologically aware country of Germany, may be surprising.

However, the paradox is that the development of illegal dumping services runs parallel with the very increase in environmental awareness, the latter forcing governments to raise costs for industrial dumping, which indirectly encourages industrialists to opt for cheaper, if illicit, solutions. Past and current cases of illegal waste disposal share a key characteristic, displaying the dynamics of a specific partnership between the official economy and organised crime. Organised crime offers a service to legitimate businesses and receives in exchange opportunities for entrepreneurial development. The case of Naples, however, offers new food for thought that may alter previous analytical assumptions.

The judicial investigation that followed was a response to widespread stereotypes. First, that the responsibility for the rubbish crisis was to be directly attributed to organised crime; second, that the root of the problem was the demagogy of the environmental movement. In fact, organised crime found business opportunities thanks to the inefficiency of legitimate entrepreneurs and the “dirty collar offenders” operating among them. Moreover, even the trite adage, whereby entrepreneurs from the North of the country find an unfavourable atmosphere for business in the South due to the activities of organised crime, proved to be totally inaccurate in this case. The case discussed above shows that the prime beneficiaries of the chaotic situation were the very actors who produced it, namely the legitimate companies who, after giving organised crime a chance to offer their services, blamed organised crime itself for their own incapacity to deliver what was required by contract.

Among the other benefits gained was a request for more funds to perform a job which, as it was claimed, was hampered by chaos and by the insatiable request of protection money by local criminal groups. Dirty collar crime, in brief, had created a particularly favourable climate for business: causing chaos had boosted profits. False blame allocation also proved ineffective with regard to the

purported demagoguery of the local environmental movement and the local authorities' unwillingness to host waste disposal sites on their territories. The investigation showed clearly that the environmental movement and the local representatives started mobilising only when unauthorised sites were used, including a site destined for the construction of a new paediatric hospital. In conclusion, by observing the case of Naples, one may well suggest that the term "organised crime" should be abandoned altogether in favour of the term "illegal enterprise." This is carried out by businessmen, politicians, and some members of criminal syndicates.